

marriage in the 21st century

MARRIAGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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**Liz Sutton
Andreas Cebulla
Sue Middleton**

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SUMMARY

This report summarises the findings of eight focus groups conducted to explore married people's perceptions of the attitudes and behaviours that helped marriages to last rather than end in separation or divorce. The eight focus groups involved sixty participants from medium/high and low-income households recruited from two areas in an East Midland city. Participants were married for between five and over fifty years and, with the exception of four women, were in their first marriages. The discussions were moderated by the authors, using semi-structured topic guides, and lasted between 90 and 110 minutes.

Findings

The focus group discussions showed that:

- Participants felt that being married was an important part of their life and identity, but also that the present generation and society in general did not value marriage to the same extent as they did;
- Attitudes towards marriage were strongly influenced by the values, which participants had acquired from their parents, and the social norms prevailing in society and within the extended family at the time of marriage;
- The presence of, or the desire to have, children strongly influenced women's positive attitude towards marriage;
- Marriage was perceived as an act of great symbolic importance and a public statement of commitment;
- Modern social values, new opportunities, choices and expectations, and an equalisation of career aspirations of men and women were thought to have resulted in more fluid gender roles within the home, which may create new areas of conflict;
- In particular, older group participants perceived these changes as threatening the foundations that may help marriages to last;
- Participants believed that a readiness to 'work at a relationship' and the desire to make relationships work, even when a marriage might experience situations of duress, were essential to a lasting marriage;
- Commitment was seen as critical to a successful marriage, although participants found it hard to describe the substance of commitment;
- In addition, love, emotional stability and support, financial security and a mutual recognition of the need to 'give and take' were described as the key ingredients to a 'good' marriage;
- Participants stressed that marital relationships changed with time, and so did the stresses and harmonies associated with them;
- They viewed communication, in particular an ability and willingness to 'talk through problems' and to listen to each other as vitally important, but also recognised the practical limitations of frequent communication;
- Separate as well as joined activities, and gestures (for instance, sending Valentine cards) were perceived to be essential to strengthening married life;
- Participants also used forms of manipulation, which they thought would help to avoid, limit or reduce conflict (for instance, 'going deaf') or to ensure their views were heard, recognised and accepted (for instance, threats or temporarily leaving the home);
- There was some indication that women were more likely to use manipulation in marriage or, at least, were more willing to acknowledge their use than men were.

1 INTRODUCTION

In February 2003, Care for the Family (CFF) commissioned the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP), Loughborough University, to conduct an exploratory study of the nature of marriage in the 21st Century. The study collected the views of married people about intra-marital behaviour and attitudes, which might contribute to the stability and duration of marriages in the present day. Participants were typically in their first marriage and had been married for different lengths of time. The aim of the research was to contribute to filling the gap in our knowledge of how marriages are and have been made to work and to last.

The research was designed, conducted and the collected data analysed by Sue Middleton (Director), Liz Sutton (Research Associate) and Andreas Cebulla (Assistant Director).

The report is divided into six chapters. Following this introduction (Chapter 1), Chapter 2 describes the focus group methodology used in this study and gives some background information about group participants. Chapter 3 provides a brief account of evidence from existing literature, which has explored the nature and duration of marriages and divorce. The next two chapters summarise the key findings of the present study. The first of these chapters (Chapter 4) highlights participants' perception of the meaning and importance of marriage, both to themselves and, in their perception, to society. The next chapter (Chapter 5) describes how participants negotiated their own marriages, noting activities which they believed contributed to sustaining the relationship. The final chapter (Chapter 6) summarises the key findings and outlines possible areas for future research.

2 METHODOLOGY

The research was based upon eight focus groups, conducted during April 2003. Group discussions were conducted, separately, with married men and married women; most of whom were in their first marriage. Only one partner of a married couple was recruited to the groups, both to facilitate recruitment and create greater openness among participants, whose contributions would not be compared to those of their husbands or wives. The objective of greater openness was also the reason for setting up separate groups for men and women.

Participants came from households with different income levels and had been married for different lengths of time. Different income groups were selected to reflect potentially different levels of need and of financial dependence between partners, which were assumed to influence the way in which spouses managed their own marriage and how they perceived the value of marriage more generally. Different income groups might also adopt different cultural values, which in turn affect their marriages and their perceptions of marriage as an institution. Likely different cultural values and different life cycle experiences were also the main reason for selecting participants who had been married for different lengths of time.

No specific effort was made to recruit individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds because the small number of focus groups would not have allowed a separate analysis of issues and perceptions relating to marriage for individuals of different ethnic origin. However, nor were individuals from ethnic minorities excluded from the groups and a small number did, in fact, participate.

The group discussions were tape recorded with the permission of the participants, and transcribed. Citations from the discussion, which are reproduced in the text, have been labelled to indicate the gender, income status and the length of the marriage of who is cited. The latter could not always be firmly established, because speakers could not be identified with certainty from the recorded voices. Wherever this is the case, the individual is identified as belonging either to the 'younger' or 'older' marriage-age group (see 2.1).

2.1 The Participants

Professional recruiters were employed to identify individuals from two areas in an East Midlands city, who were willing to participate in the focus groups. In total, 60 participants, 32 men and 28 women, attended the groups, including 27 from low income households. Low income households were defined as a household with a total annual income of no more than £10,000. Thirty three participants came from households with income above £10,000 (Table 2.1). Participants were married for between five and over 50 years. Those married for 5-10 years or 10-30 years, and those married for 10-30 years or more than 30 years were paired in individual focus groups.

In the course of the fieldwork, it became apparent that differences in attitudes towards and perceptions of marriage were most pronounced between participants married for up to 25 or 30 years, and those married for longer. Although this is, of course, an approximation and boundaries were fluid and overlapping, the distinction between these two groups was found to be the most useful throughout the analysis. For this reason, most comparisons in the text will refer to these two categories of people. In the text, they will be referred to as belonging to the ‘younger’ or ‘older’ marriage-age group, or simply as ‘younger’ or ‘older’ participants, as the length of marriage often closely related to the age of the participant.

Table 2.1 Focus Group Composition

Gender	Income Group		Length of Marriage		
	Low Income Group	Medium/High Income	5-10 yrs	10-30 yrs	More than 30 yrs
Male	14	18	6	18	8
Female	13	15	4	14	10
Total	27	33	10	32	18

The average age of the participants was 49, with the youngest participant aged 23 and the oldest aged 89 years. The overwhelming majority of participants (58) had children from their

current marriage. The mean number of children per participant was 2.2. Just over half (34) of all participants were in some form of employment, 14 were retired, two unemployed and ten were inactive due to illness or because they looked after their homes.

The focus of the research was on intact first marriages. Yet, four women participants had previously been married and were in their second marriage: three had been previously divorced, while a fourth had been bereaved. In all four cases, however, the second marriages had already lasted twice as long as their previous marriage and were, therefore, considered to have been of sufficient duration to be included in this study.

2.2 Topic Guides

Semi-structured topic guides were chosen to guide the group discussions, which lasted between 90 and 110 minutes. While helpful to maintaining focus and ensuring all areas of concern and interest were covered, the use of these topic guides allowed respondents the chance to express their views without the group moderators, concerned with following the guide, being overly directive. The guide contained the following themes: the importance of marriage in today's society, beginning a marriage, and managing marriage (see Annex A).

The themes were chosen to provide a careful and balanced introduction to a discussion of a research topic, which many participants might have felt uncomfortable with because of its potentially very personal nature. The group moderators, therefore, emphasised the general discussion of the topic of marriage, while providing space for participants to recall their own experiences during the group discussions.

2.3 Vignette

The researchers used a simple vignette at the start of each group session to introduce participants to the research topic. Participants were asked, in small groups of three to five, to discuss and name factors, which they thought were essential 'ingredients' to a successful marriage. For this purpose, a number of cut-out cards had been prepared and labelled with potential options, i.e.

- Attraction

- Commitment
- Emotional stability and support
- Financial security
- ‘Give and Take’
- Intimacy
- Love
- Religion
- Romance
- Trust

Blank cards were provided, with pens, for participants to add their own ideas. Participants were asked to name the three most important ‘ingredients’ and encouraged to discuss their selection amongst themselves.

This exercise served as a gentle introduction to the topic, but also generated much discussion and important insights into participants’ perceptions of marriage and its value.

2.4 Caveats

Recruitment for the focus groups proved a difficult exercise. People approached by recruiters and invited to take part in a focus group were often reluctant to agree to discuss, in front of others, aspects of marriage, even in general rather than personal terms. As the group discussions revealed, many participants found separating the personal from the general experience (or observation) of marriage difficult. The open nature of focus groups made it virtually impossible to discuss personal, sensitive issues at greater depth, - nor was this the aim of the study. Rather, it sought to encourage participants to identify key themes, issues or activities that, in their view, might contribute to a lasting marriage. An in-depth exploration of the validity and relevance of these views would have to be studied in one-to-one interview or couple-interviewer situations.

As the study sought to identify key features of intact marriages, it lacked a control group of failed marriages. The evidence thus collected presents the perceptions of people in

(currently) intact marriages, but lacked a comparator to validate or test participants' claims. These claims do, however, provide important initial pointers for further exploration.

3 A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

First-marriage rates in Britain have fallen steadily since the early 1970s and, simultaneously, have been offset by a growth in couples cohabiting outside marriage. In the early 1990s, around 70 per cent of spinsters marrying had cohabited with their future spouse before marriage. This compared to just three per cent of those marrying in the 1960s (Haskey, 1995). Divorce rates rose steeply between the early 1960s and the 1980s, but have since stabilised and, recently, levelled off (ONS, 2003).

Much of the available research of the sociology of the family has focussed on issues of divorce or cohabitation. While this research provides indirect insights into ‘what makes marriages work’, there is little, if any, evidence of a more direct nature of what makes marriages work.

3.1 Divorce

Divorce has probably been the most intensely researched phenomenon in the field of family sociology. Several studies have been concerned with identifying circumstances or conditions that might be associated with an increased risk of divorce. Among the more recent examples is Kiernan and Mueller’s study (1998), in which the authors analysed the National Child Development Study (NCDS), the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the Family Resources Survey (FRS) to gain insight into the question ‘who divorces’ and the differences between those who are divorced and those who are not.¹ Their analyses revealed that beginning a relationship at an early age, cohabitating, parental divorce, and being economically, somatically and emotionally vulnerable all independently increased the statistical risk of divorce.

Similar findings emerged from a recent systematic review of the evidence of the association between socio-demographic and behavioural factors and divorce in Germany. This review

¹ The NCDS surveyed and has since followed over 17,000 individuals born in a single week in 1958, repeatedly interviewing the cohort members and collecting a range of demographic and attitudinal data, including data about cohabitation, marriage and divorce. The BHPS is an annually repeated panel survey of some 10,000 individuals, which was first conducted in 1991. The BHPS collects individual and household information, including about income, mobility, and social networks. The FRS is an annually repeated cross-sectional survey of some 25,000 individuals, concerned primarily with collecting income and expenditure data.

used the statistical tool of meta-analysis to compare and contrast the result of 42 divorce studies (Wagner and Weiss, 2003). It found the risk of divorce to be significantly associated with pre-marriage (e.g. cohabitation, time passed between first encounter and beginning of relationship) and post-marriage behaviour (work status after marriage), and with socio-demographic characteristics (education, previous marriage). The risk of divorce appeared significantly reduced among partners who married later in life and who ‘invested’ in their marriage, for instance, by having children or shared property.

3.2 Commitment

While these studies identify ‘measurable’ demographic factors and their influence on the statistical risk of divorce, they shed little, if any, light on how couples manage their married life in everyday practice. Jane Lewis (2001) has conducted qualitative research to explore the experiences of relationships among cohabiting and married couples and their parents. In her book, Lewis focuses on perceptions of commitment and their relationship with individualism. She defines commitment as ‘a sense of personal responsibility for maintaining the marriage and a belief in marriage as an important institution’ (Lewis, 2001, p. 125). Her interviews showed that older couples’ perceptions of commitment were tied in with obligation and duty. The more fluid roles and divisions of labour in younger compared to older couples’ households gave added importance to communication and negotiation in the spouses’ efforts to sustain their marriage.

Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (2002) have explored how commitment manifests itself in the behaviour of individuals. Studying the behaviours and attitudes of married, engaged and ‘dating’ students, they found a number of behaviours used to express and display commitment to a partner. These included providing affection (e.g. saying ‘I love you’) and non-verbal behaviours, including spontaneous expressions of intimacy and fondness (hugs and kisses), offering gifts and arranging surprises. The authors conclude that the students used affection as the prime means of communicating, to the other person, the importance they attach to their relationship. Weigel and Ballard-Reisch identify the celebration of milestones in a relationship, such as anniversaries, and planning for the future (‘creating a relational future’) as partners’ main expressions to commitment to another.

The exploration of commitment amongst married couples of different generations, and perceptions of marriage and marital breakdown were themes pursued in this study. Specifically, the present research focussed on identifying attitudes and behaviours that married people believed to be key to managing and maintaining marriages.

4 THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

4.1 Introduction

The importance that group participants attached to their own marriages and to the institution of marriage emerged as crucial to understanding why they believed their marriages and the marriages of others had been sustained, sometimes over long periods. Most typically, the value attached to marriage was perceived to be the result of societal values, which individuals had adopted, or of very personal feelings of affinity with and love for a partner. The two were not mutually exclusive and both, in their own right, could exert important influences on the sustainability of a marriage. However, whereas societal pressure to get and remain married was perceived to become less important, personal feelings were not. ‘Commitment’ to a partnership and maintaining this commitment emotionally and practically were seen as crucial to the successful ‘management’ of a marriage.

4.2 Motivations for Marriage

Across marriage-age groups, early motivations for marriage continued to influence present-day perceptions of the value of marriage to society and of the personal benefit of and responsibility for maintaining a marriage.

Most participants explained that ‘love’ of their spouse had been their main reason for getting married. At the time of their weddings, few, if any, participants could envisage spending their lives with anyone else. However, there were other reasons, too, for getting married; most importantly, to provide security for children, to please parents, and to progress an existing relationship.

In particular for women, the most common reason for choosing to marry was their intention to have children now or in the (then) near future. Many older and younger women expressed concern about having children outside of marriage. Older participants were anxious about the stigma associated with having children outside of wedlock at the time they were having, or planning to have, children. Younger women also believed that having married parents - and, as a result, a shared surname - provided the child with a concrete sense of identity, which the parents considered essential for a ‘healthy’, balanced upbringing.

Some participants also noted that their parents had exerted outright or subtle pressure to make them get married. Older participants, in particular, recognised societal values and rules of behaviour at the time they wed, which gave them few options but to comply and marry.

From a young age, marriage was presented as the accepted 'stepping-stone' to adulthood:

When we grew up that was something that you aimed at, that you wanted to achieve. You didn't want to be a spinster and you certainly didn't want to be a wallflower at the village dance. Your right of passage was when you got married and you led your own life and you went out into the big, wide world all on your own.

(Female, low income group, second marriage after bereavement, married second time for 12 years)

For participants who married thirty or more years ago, cohabiting had not been a socially acceptable option. Participants who had been married for a relatively shorter time felt that, although not putting them under any direct pressure, their parents were relieved and pleased when they eventually married their cohabiting partners.

Some participants recalled their 'shotgun' weddings after the conception of a child out of wedlock. These participants married their partners because of their parents' strong religious and moral beliefs, which the participant felt should be respected.

Most participants, in fact, felt that the morals, which their parents had passed on to them and which taught them that marriage was socially and personally the 'right' step to take, had influenced their decision to marry and, ultimately, to remain married. In particular, many of the older participants came from 'intact' family backgrounds and this had helped to shape their own values:

When I got married, I expected to be married forever basically. You know, when I got married, that was it. Like my parents and her parents, which I think has a real effect on it, both of them are long time married couples. So I'm not used to, say, divorce in either family. Even if I did, it wouldn't make any difference.

(Male, medium/high income group, older marriage age group)

Among younger participants, marriage was also seen as a continuation of a relationship or a natural progression to be enacted when the time felt right for both partners. This was particularly the case when participants had already been living with their partners for some

time. In the process, getting married was recognised as a conscious decision requiring planning and effort and also as an act of greater symbolic meaning:

... think with marriage ...it's a very conscious act, it is something that you've decided to do and therefore you haven't just drifted into it. I would be most surprised if someone said to me, 'well, we just drifted into marriage'. I can't believe you drift into marriage because you've got to make a step in your life and relationship. It occurs on a certain day I mean. You might drift into the proposing and all the rest of it, but I mean the actual act of realising, what you are saying and signing a document and all the rest of it.

(Male, medium/high income group, younger marriage age group)

This awareness of the decision to marry and its implications for the individual's life was reflected in the group participants' repeated assertion that to marry later in life was the best foundation for a lasting marriage. Marriage was perceived to be for 'mature' people, who were ready to settle and no longer interested in 'experimenting' with partnerships. Delaying marriage, in their views, would increase the commitment to a relationship, whether new or merely formalised through marriage, and thus contributed to its lasting.

4.3 The Importance of Commitment

For many participants, their early motivations for choosing to marry reflected core values, which they claimed they had held onto for much of their later married lives. These values were invariably referred to as 'commitment'. In all focus groups, participants spontaneously and unprompted remarked that commitment had been the key factor to their maintaining their marriages to-date. Commitment was an essential part to beginning a marital relationship and to continuing it; and marriage itself was perceived as an expression of this commitment. This said, most participants found commitment a vague concept, which was difficult to define.

Commitment was generally described as 'a bond', 'a glue' or 'a partnership' that cemented the relationship and which involved a willingness, on the part of both partners, to 'work at this relationship', especially when it was under stress. This understanding was shared by all age groups, that is, people who had been married for different lengths of time. However, some differences in perceptions did emerge between different marriage-age groups, and between men and women.

For older women, the resulting partnership was frequently a dependent relationship, where they took on, in the broadest sense, caring roles in the households, which persisted to the present as they were looking after the household or their ill or frail husband. ‘Commitment’ for many older participants, while based on dedication and love, was tied to clearly defined responsibilities. These, in turn, had remained grounded in traditional societal values, which distinguished between (male) breadwinner and (female) carers. Besides dedication to husband or wife, commitment also represented a desire to (continue to) fulfil these roles and responsibilities.

In contrast, younger participants made fewer references to present-day social pressures as likely influences on their decisions to marry. They more frequently viewed commitment as a personal act, to be expressed to each other to remain together:

I just wanted to give to my wife,..[to] say look I am committed to you. I don't want anybody else, don't even want to think of anything else but you.

(Man, low income group, married for 5 years)

As already noted earlier, an important factor in the decision of many, in particular of many women, was the desire (at the time of marriage) to have children. Although participants recognised that many couples today cohabit and successfully raise children, all believed marriage to provide a desired stable environment for their (future) children. Here commitment was not just an expression of an emotional bond, but also of a practical bond. Many respondents felt that, undergoing a marriage ceremony made it more difficult to remove oneself from the relationship and, ultimately, harder to separate or divorce:

Yes, I'm sure there are a lot of very successful people co-habiting and bringing up very well-balanced kids. But at the end of the day there's the open door, is there for people to drift in and out very easily. Whereas if you've actually gone through the proper process, I don't know how to phrase it really, of signing, marriage vows etc., does mean that you have to think more carefully and have to go through more things to get out of it. So hopefully, it would be more secure for the children, etc., rather than being able to come and go freely with one and another.

(Woman, medium/high income group, married for 16 years)

Women were particularly concerned with marriage representing stability. This was not only reflected in their stressing the importance of marriage when planning a family and having children. Women also more frequently described commitment as a statement of their intention

to remain with their husbands, regardless of any intra-marital difficulties they might face at one point or another:

I think as well, commitment can actually override things as well. I mean if you are committed, even if you don't always talk things through and share things, the commitment will bring you back, if you have had some sort of argument or something like that, or disagreement. If you are committed to each other, then you will be committed to keeping together and to getting back. If life does have ups and downs, then you know, you are not going to let the downs split you apart.

(Woman, medium/high income group, married for 18 years)

This contrasted with male participants' understanding of commitment as articulated, in particular, by men from lower income households. They tended to define commitment as an expression of exclusivity. Within their relationships, they would no longer consider a relationship with anyone else:

You can see those guys, out every night, to catch a bird and drinking and whatever. But he gets cut down to size in the morning. If you have a good partner, I think, that is it. You are there, it is a commitment all the way through. The love fits in accordingly. You can't have secret love lives and all that and still expect it to work.

(Man, low income group, married for 33 years)

Whereas some men thus perceived commitment as the rejection of extra-marital relationships and defined in relation to external events or conditions, women tended, almost exclusively, to define commitment as an inward orientation: the willingness and desire to stay together 'through thick and thin'.

4.4 Perceptions of Marriage Today

Although participants felt that it was important for them personally to be married, most felt that marriage was not held in the same esteem that it was thirty or forty years ago. Three main themes emerged from exploring participants' views on the importance of marriage in today's society.

Firstly, participants argued that cultural changes had made it easier to end a marriage. One participant referred to this as the emergence of a 'disposable culture'. Older participants, in particular, felt that the changing nature of societal values and rules had resulted in increased chances of separation and divorce, which they rejected:

I think some people are so busy, both people in a marriage, that they do so much apart and have so much freedom that they just grow apart sometimes. And they have so much independence and what have you. And at the end of the day, maybe, there isn't much time that they do spend together or share things either.

(Woman, medium/high income group, married for 27 years)

Although recognising the greater ease with which divorce can be achieved and the potential conflict this might entail, younger age groups were more likely to accept this as an inevitable side effect of greater societal freedom, which had emerged in recent decades and which they valued highly.

A similar division of opinions between older and younger generations, or traditional and modern marriages, was discernible with respect to attitudes towards women's changing role in the labour market. Older female and male participants expressed concern over changes in women's economic status. They recognised that, in present-day society, women had career aspirations and were more likely to want to undertake paid work outside the home than was the case when they themselves had married. Participants felt that it was difficult to reconcile women's work or career aspirations with their more traditional responsibilities as carer in the home. The resultant blurring of gender roles, as men were taking on more responsibility for childcare and household tasks than in previous generations, they felt, threatened tried-and-tested patterns of family life.

This perception was, in fact, shared by many younger group participants. Some of the younger male participants acknowledged the emotional and practical difficulties they had experienced in adjusting their own expectations, aspirations and domestic roles upon the birth of their children, or as their wives became the main breadwinner (see 5.2) or wished to realise their own career ambitions. Yet, there was a greater acceptance of such changes and of the benefits of allowing them to happen among this group than among older participants.

Finally, most participants expressed the view that both men and women had higher material expectations at the beginning of married life than those married between 20 and 30 years ago. This, it was felt, posed an added strain on relationships. Again, opinions were divided between older (mainly: male) participants and younger participants. Older (male) participants were concerned about today's newlyweds' apparently higher material

expectations, which placed increased stress on a marriage from its outset. Older low income participants particularly felt that they were brought up in a culture where they had to work hard to earn a basic living before they could strive towards achieving ambitious material aims. For them, the reverse appeared to be happening today.

Younger participants acknowledged that financial aspirations had changed, but they also stressed that financial pressures had increased and that this was not entirely driven by individual choice. Some younger participants, from both income group categories, felt that social expectations had risen as had the cost of living. Both required second incomes and more work effort, which could in turn place more strain on marriages.

4.5 Key Ingredients of a ‘Good’ Marriage

Using the vignette described in the methodology section of this report, focus group participants were asked to identify the ‘key ingredients’ of a successful marriage. Across all eight focus groups, participants selected five different ‘ingredients’, namely:

- love;
- commitment;
- emotional stability and support;
- financial security; and
- ‘give and take’.

Love, commitment and emotional stability and support were most frequently thought to be crucial to a successful marriage. There was, however, recognition that what was important in a marriage changed with time. Factors initially of importance might cease to be as important in later stages of a marriage. Attraction and romance were first among them, as they were seen to be important at the time of the first meeting, when couples fall in love. However, they were not considered the foundation of marriages:

I mean, if I'd only been married a year I would have put that first, attraction first. You would, wouldn't you? But now I've been married so long, that's faded. In the nicest possible way, you know what I mean? Because we've all got more wrinkly. I mean he was really handsome when I first met him but obviously we've both got more wrinkly. So, physical attraction's not so strong.

(Woman, medium income group, married for more than 30 years)

I mean, stuff like intimacy, attraction, love, I think, we've all become a bit long in the tooth. You know it is important, of course, it's very important. But as your marriage moves on it becomes less important. It's always there and without love nobody would want to stay married, but it comes further down the pecking order.

(Man, medium/high income group, married for 40 years)

Whereas there was near unanimity with respect to the relevance of love, emotional support, trust and commitment, opinions as to the importance of financial security to sustaining a marriage were more varied. Whereas women typically recognised that a lack of financial security could cause many strains on a marriage, none of them thought that it was a key factor in beginning or maintaining a marital relationship. Low income women, in particular, believed that being financially secure was not, and could not be, an issue for them, often because they had never experienced it in the first instance:

For thirty years it has been penny-pinching and robbing Peter to pay Paul all the time. So you never have the financial security. It would be nice to have it, but if you haven't had it, you don't miss it.

(Woman, low income group, married for 30 years)

In contrast, many men deemed financial security a likely point of conflict in a marriage. Male participants recalled that this was particularly the case at the beginning of their marriage and when children were born. Some men then felt their marriage was put under particular pressure when their spouses gave up work to look after and raise their children and the household, therefore, lost a significant part of their previous joint income. For some men, financial issues remained a potential point of contention throughout their marriage. However, the issue of contention would often move from having no financial security and, for this reason, experiencing stress to having obtained financial security, but disagreeing with the partner over how to manage finances jointly.

All groups agreed that, whatever the importance of financial circumstances in sustaining a marriage, they were more likely than other influences to change with time and to do so frequently. Participants thus felt that financial circumstances would not, and should not be allowed to, take on greater importance than those other factors that would contribute to cementing a marriage. In addition, many participants felt that, taking a long-term view of a marriage, as in this case, would help overcome initial destabilising influences of financial worries:

The hard years are at the start of the marriage and it just gets better and better. We are having a really good time now...and we have more freedom to do things together now. Twenty years we have been bringing children up, the youngest is 17, but now we go out more and go away more. It is great, it really is. We went to Amsterdam in February, like, just the two of us with a big crowd. We are reaping the benefits now.

(Man, low income group, married for 22 years)

Related to the realisation that married life almost inevitably has its ‘ups and downs’ was the notion of ‘give and take’ as an everyday practice. It was perceived to play an important role in the change from being newlyweds to established partners and was considered crucial to a marriage’s longevity. Many participants believed that one had to be continually aware of each other’s changing needs within a relationship. Part of this was the need to deal constructively with each other’s less acceptable habits:

Well, you are two strangers when you first get married, aren’t you. And if you can’t accept the faults of the other one and forgive them for their faults and also expect them to do the same for you, then you’re on a sticky wicket.

(Male, medium/high income group, older marriage-age group)

‘Give and take’ took many forms and involved various negotiation strategies. They typically involved the exchange of favours or, as one participant called it, ‘brownie points’, whereby one partner offered favours or completed tasks for the other, which could then be ‘saved up’ and redeemed when he or she needed a favour in return. Negotiation of these favours, which might involve activities such as taking turns in minding children, and openness about them were understood as fundamental to day-to-day married living. Communicating these needs was a quintessential pre-requisite to these negotiations, involving both verbal and ‘symbolic’ communication.

5 COMMUNICATION, NEGOTIATION AND STRATEGIES

5.1 The Importance of Communication

Participants regarded the ability and willingness to communicate or ‘talk through problems’ to resolve outstanding issues or arguments, which might exist between partners, as vitally important to their marriages. Some of the most problematic periods in marriages, which participants recalled, were: having and bringing up children, coping with redundancy, illness, death or retirement, and becoming step-parents. However, besides such significant and far-reaching events, there were many day-to-day issues or potential disputes, whose resolution required effective communication.

Increased and new responsibilities and, for women in particular, the experience of isolation as they took on the role of the housekeeper, were described as the main causes of stress and tension in marriage. This was particularly the case for older women, who had not previously cohabitated with their future husband, might have had no career outside the domestic home or whose marriage withdrew them from the social and physical environment they had been accustomed to. These women expressed a sense of shock as they entered married life, sometimes with someone whom they then still described as a ‘comparative stranger’. They also expressed a sense of bewilderment at the array of household chores, which they were suddenly responsible for:

I hated it when we first got married. It was a shock because my mother did everything for me and all of a sudden I was in a house on my own. I had nobody around me because I'd moved away from my friends and I was just there on my own. I was going to work, coming home and cleaning and I felt so isolated.

(Woman, low income group, married for more than 30 years)

Inside married life, the presence of children was widely acknowledged as a frequent source of stress and conflict as well as of harmony and happiness.

The risk of stress and conflict appeared greatest during the period before and just after the birth of a child because of the changes in the division of labour within the household, which accompanied childbirth. Women who looked after their young children, especially if they had given up work, felt that it was important for men to recognise the nature of the isolation that they often felt while being at home all day with their children. They felt it

was important that their husbands talked to them about their day when they themselves returned home at the end of a working day:

He works with people all day and I would say, when I was at home with the children I would say, 'talk to me'. And he would say, yes, 'I have been talking to people all day', and nobody had been talking to me, you know. He was sick of talking and I was desperate. I would talk to the wall, if it would talk back.

(Woman, medium income group, married for 13 years)

Women who were step-mothers of their new husbands' children also felt exposed to particular stress. The women recalled how they had to gain the trust and confidence of their step-children and how they felt jealous about their new partner having a closer relationship to, and spending more time with, his children than the spouse. While, on the one hand, responses in these instances were largely pragmatic, namely 'to get on with it', talking about their feelings with their husband was also perceived to have helped to resolve misunderstandings and conflict.

Husband and wife talking about their day's experience in and outside the home was, thus, described as an essential strategy for solving or avoiding conflict, and group participants stressed the value of 'listening and talking'. However, experience had also taught participants that 'listening and talking' was not a universally effective strategy. In fact, 'listening and talking' was not the general rule and many participants acknowledged that they or their husband/wife often found it hard to fulfil their mutual roles as listeners, if not as talkers. Low income men, thus, reported that they would seek to avoid potential conflict situations by 'going deaf' or removing themselves from the situation. These men felt that these strategies were effective in diffusing further conflict and provided them with enough distance to allow both parties to calm down. The aim was not so much to resolve conflict or arguments, but to ignore and forget them. Women participants expressed their concern about, if not annoyance with, this approach. Some struggled to find their own voices within the relationship or felt that it required considerable effort:

I have always thought that the only way that you could make a marriage work is to keep communicating, to keep talking. And if somebody won't talk to you, what can you do? It means that your marriage is going to suffer, which it inevitably does, if they don't speak to you. So what do you do? You start to nag, 'speak to me, speak to me, speak to me' and they are going 'leave me alone, leave me alone'. So you do, you have got to keep nagging, nagging. You are a bit like a

mouse after the cheese, aren't you? You have got to keep going at it and it is hard work.

(Woman, low income group, married for 30 years)

These examples highlight a tacit consensus among group participants that communication was essential to a successful marriage. This communication of problems, worries or resentment could well be 'one-way', as long as it was part of a 'give and take' arrangement:

I think, it is important to listen to each other; let off steam, like you can sense that someone comes back from work and they've had a rough day and your role in life is to sit there and say 'yes, dear – no, dear'. Not quite as crude as that. But letting them get down to ground level again because the following day it might be your turn.

(Man, medium/high income group; younger marriage-age group)

Participants who valued and appreciated communication in marriage noted that they had established, and sought to adhere to, a principle to 'never go to bed on an argument'. This expression was used, unprompted, in all focus groups and generated much agreement among most, if not all, participants. For most, making sure that reconciliation occurred before the end of the day was crucial to ensuring harmony the next day. Failure to reconcile on the same day was considered to protract conflict, making it ever more difficult to resolve disputed issues. Participants wanted to avoid these out of respect for their partners, but also because they felt that protracted arguments would disrupt how husbands and wives worked and supported each other in the household:

I can't remember one argument, there have been so many. We are both a bit wacky at the best of times. We are both wrong but it might last a day, but that's all....Otherwise you would die of starvation!

(Man, low income group, married 52 years)

The style in which communication took place was also perceived to be important to conflict resolution or avoidance, and for a harmonious relationship. Participants felt that while a sense of humour was a positive ingredient to any marriage, it also served as an important tool in diffusing conflict. Humour helped to put disagreements into perspective, demonstrating one's own role in bringing about a dispute or highlighting that many arguments were, in fact, 'petty'.

5.2 Negotiating Roles and Responsibilities

For some older women, being married meant to provide care for their husbands and was intrinsically linked with traditional gender roles within the house. Many older women expected to fulfil the domestic chores as part of the role of a wife, while their husbands were the 'breadwinners'. It was a role taken on in the context of society at the time they got married. However, some recognised that times and, therefore, values and their own behaviours were changing:

Like I say, I look after my husband because that's what my mum did, but I do say to him sometimes, 'we're living in this day and age now, you don't have to get waited on all the time'. Because I'm learning from this generation.

(Woman, low income group, married for 42 years)

In comparison to the group of older women, many younger women described their negotiating domestic chores and roles with their husbands as more proactive, based on both partners seeking an agreeable compromise. Both, younger women and younger men recognised the need for open negotiation, in particular, if both partners were working outside the home. Compromises were reached with regard to cooking, ironing and cleaning and some activities, particularly cooking, were seen as joint activities. Childcare was also viewed as a joint effort, with examples of husbands being increasingly involved.

The adjustment of domestic roles posed a particular challenge for male participants, who had been part of a (near) complete role reversal. In this study, two male participants had been 'house-husbands' (one still was at the time of the group discussion), giving up their jobs to look after their children while their partners pursued their better paying careers. A third participant, although still working, had witnessed his wife become the main earner in the household. Both events, becoming a house-husband or a secondary earner, presented the male participants, at least initially, with problems of self-doubt and a sense of inferiority, sometimes reinforced by adverse or critical reactions from friends or family:

...for the last 18 or 19 years, I was the breadwinner, but over the last 18 months I haven't been and it's very hard. I went through a lot of things, 'am I worthless, are my days of me being the breadwinner over now?' You see your wife going from doing some part-time work to help out to suddenly overtaking you. I'm the person for the little extras now and it's a massive shock and I understand that in a lot of families it would break it. And to be honest with you, I was not so much confused but I felt degraded. We hope we've come through it now sort of thing and we accept it.

(Man, medium/high income group, older marriage-age group)

Unlike the above case, becoming a house-husband was the result of deliberation between partners, the weighing of mainly financial 'pros' and 'cons', and the persons concerned were aware of the effects this change in status and role could have on them and on others. Differences in the perception of parental generations were particularly prevalent:

Both my parents and my wife's parents, who are all in their 70s, found it very odd [that their son/son-in-law became a househusband]. It took them a long time to get used to the fact of their son not working. The number of times they'd say, 'When are you going to get a job? What are you doing at home?' So it is very different in our generation.

(Man, medium/high income group, married for 18 years)

Although having made a conscious and deliberate decision to become a househusband, which strengthened individuals in arguing and defending their case for this role change, maintaining the change still required emotional support from their wives. In all three cases, the reassurance received from the spouse and the ability to talk openly about personal worries were stressed as essential to adopting, and adapting to, the role change.

This type of role reversal highlights the changing character of marriage in the 21st century and with it the changing nature of conflict. The well-defined household gender roles of the past are dissipating as more and more women go to work outside the home. This, in turn, entails new sources of potential conflict, as spouses, male and female, seek to find ways to negotiate their changing duties and responsibilities.

5.3 Personal Adjustment, Threats and Manipulation

Few participants described their marriages as harmonious throughout. However, it was women participants who most readily admitted to having had doubt, at one or more occasions in the past, about their choice to have got married. This questioning of the value of their marriage did not always, or even predominantly, occur when partners were locked in arguments, conflict or disagreement. Rather, women described these instances as occasions of personal reflection and private concern, which were not discussed with partners. Responses to such reflections varied. In one case discussed in the focus groups, the spouse (here: wife) adjusted her own behaviour or expectation, rather than pressing for a renegotiated settlement with their partner:

I didn't get as far as thinking, 'I'm going to leave', because I didn't want to. I think that's why. It never occurred to me. I just thought, 'I don't know what I'm going to do but this has just got to change, something has got to change'. And I think what I did in the end was I thought, 'well, I'm going to do more for myself so I don't worry about it so much' and, you know, 'see what effect that has', and also thought 'make sure you're contributing properly to the household, make sure you're not being unsupportive'. That was the only thing I decided to do. And it did work itself out in the end, you know.

(Woman, medium/high income group, married for 16 years)

In other instances, women discussed the way in which they felt they manipulated their husbands in order to resolve problems and achieve their own objectives. They did so by making concessions, 'pandering to' their husbands and, in their view, planting ideas in their minds, thus, 'moulding' their behaviour slowly over a period of time:

Give them a little bit of what they like and then do what you want to do, and they'll let you do it. And it works.

(Woman, low income group, married for 25 years)

I think you got to plant the seed and let it grow.

(Woman, low income group, married for 34 years)

Male participants, on the other hand, did not bring up the issue of manipulation of partners in marriage.

It was also only women who, at one time or another, had considered leaving their spouses. Some of them, in fact, had, although only one participant had left the home for more than one

day or night. Leaving the home was used as a verbal, and sometimes realised, threat to alert the partner to the wife's desire and need for more recognition.

W4: Sometimes you do say, 'I'm upset, I've had enough, I'm packing my bags and going'. But you don't.

W5: We all say it though, don't we?

W3: You don't mean it, do you? You are only making a threat to try and get them to listen. It is just the fact that with my husband not listening I have to actually do it. I have no intentions of seeking a divorce or anything like that, I just wanted to get his attention to sit and listen to me.

(Women, low income group, married for 9, 25 and 30 years respectively)

Such threats were used mostly in the knowledge that they could be withdrawn and that reconciliation was indeed the intended outcome. They were seen as a method to maintain or 'rescue' a relationship from breakdown. The (expected) withdrawal of threats is, of course, at least in part, a reflection of the fact that the groups consisted of (still) married spouses. In other instances, which were not captured in our focus groups, the threat might not have been withdrawn, leading perhaps to the breakdown of the marriage.

Well, it was easy when I left him for a week because we were both, he was a student and we were renting somewhere. But I think now, I think, I would think much harder about it. And also I expected us to get back together, it [leaving the home] was just a fit of pique really.

(Woman, medium/high income group, married for 16 years)

Men also described how they literally 'walk away' from conflict and disagreements (see also 5.1, p. 20), although this response was not considered or perceived to be 'threatening', but to calm tempers or to avoid disagreements escalating:

...I let her carry on. I am like a dog with a bone, I just walk away. In the end, it automatically stops. If I start arguing with her, I am just creating the problem.

(Man, low income group, married for 54 years)

It was not only personal calculations and the desire to rescue a marriage by means of (token) threats that prevented women from leaving the household altogether. In some instances, it was the pressure of relatives, in particular parents, that made these women return to their spouse. Again, there appeared to be evidence of a strong relationship between participants' behaviour and the moral and social values they had adopted from, and were practiced by, their parents:

W4: Oh yes, I walked to my mum's one morning at 2.00 am with the baby, but I lived in the countryside. There was snow on the ground but I walked to my mum's and my dad took me back the next day and said, 'I told you, you got married so you've got to go back'. Fancy taking me back. That was because I couldn't get my own way.

W6: We had a row once and I was isolated at the time and I got on the bus with my suitcase and I said, 'I'm not having this, I don't want to be married anymore, I want to come home'. But my mum said, 'you've got to go back'.

(Women, low income group, married for 12 and 34 years respectively)

Leaving one's spouse for good was only considered acceptable in cases of domestic violence or adultery. Indeed, those participants who had been previously divorced had experienced violent and/or adulterous relationships.

5.4 Strengthening Marriage

Participants recognised that changes in the life cycle, such as the birth of a child, the child leaving home or the spouse retiring, could potentially challenge their ability to retain their commitment to their marriage. However, for many older women within both income groups, a life on their own was inconceivable. Years of being at home, raising children and being financially dependent upon their husbands meant that they could not consider an alternative to married life. On the other hand, younger women noted the need to be valued as an independent person as well as a partner. Therefore, most participants were aware that they had a part to play in sustaining commitment.

Older and some younger women expressed concern that their spouse's retirement (and, in the case of younger women, children leaving the household) might put pressure on both of them as domestic arrangements would change and the couple would need to get used to each other's permanent presence (again). This seemed to be a particular concern of lower income women, as many higher income group women were better able to pursue other interests or activities outside the home.

Both men and women, from all backgrounds and ages, had their own ways of reaffirming their commitment to their marriage. Often this involved simple gestures, which were seen as signs of awareness of the presence and value of the other. They might involve buying flowers or, as in this case, buying Valentine cards:

I've got 43 Valentine cards. I've kept every one of them, and he always buys me one every year.

(Women, medium/high income group, married for 42 years)

Social activities and how they were arranged, however, were of particular significance; and joint activities were crucial. Most participants believed that it was important, for both partners, to undertake some activities separately and without the other in order to provide extra interest and talking points. But they also suggested that doing things together, from salsa dancing to decorating or gardening, aided a sense of togetherness and exclusivity. Many men recognised the importance of sharing a common purpose in sustaining commitment to the marriage. Having a shared vision for the future, a 'common goal', was felt to help to cement and strengthen the bond between husbands and wives and helped to promote a sense of 'being part of a team'. Similarly, women felt that making a decision together enhanced a sense of purpose and teamwork.

Men and women spoke about the need to have fun, which included spontaneity, touch and laughter. Spontaneous acts such as 'skipping work' and going away for a few days were perceived as helping to increase interest and excitement in marriages, which without this injection would grow 'stale'. Physical contact and laughter was considered important in fostering a sense of intimacy, which reinforced a sense of unity as a couple.

The participants were keen to point out that, how one strengthens a marriage, depended on the stage, and age, of their marriage. While some behaviours or gestures could be maintained throughout a marriage, others would evolve with time. Love, trust and caring were important in the early stages of marriage and, again, in later stages, when caring meant providing physical help to a spouse. In between, the commitment to a marriage could often be expressed more practically, through establishing a family, shared child rearing and the realisation of joint material objectives, such as holidays. Verbal and symbolic communication, through words and shared activities, maintain their own importance throughout a marriage, although their individual contribution to sustaining commitment may vary with time.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Participants perceived marriage to be a very important institution and mutual expression of commitment to them personally. However, they also noted that, for many in today's generation, marriage had obtained a lesser status than for those married in the 1960s or 1970s. Marriage in the 21st century was perceived to be changing mainly due to increased opportunities and expectations. The rigid norms that structured society 30 or 40 years ago and constrained choice and opportunity, in particular for women, had broken down. This has resulted in more fluid roles for both men and women within the home and has brought about new forms of conflict, requiring patience, tolerance and negotiation, if marriages are to survive.

However, this exploratory study produced evidence to suggest that younger men and women continue to learn from, or at least be influenced by, their parents' values, which stress the importance of marriage as an institution and of commitment as the means to maintain a marriage.

At the same time, the study found that older generations, in particular women, also recognised that there were lessons they could learn from younger generations. Renegotiating domestic responsibilities, learning to acknowledge the presence and to support the identity and independence of the partner, and talking about, rather than ignoring or hiding, problems were most participants' ambitions, if not practices, in and for their marriage.

The study can only offer a preliminary exploration of the everyday practice of married life and the way in which spouses negotiate their living together. Moreover, as noted in our introduction, while the participants in this study described and explained their own (and others') negotiation and communication practices, the absence of a control group made it impossible to ascertain the validity of some of the claims made about their effectiveness. Nor was it possible to ascertain the reactions of participants' spouses to the perceptions and strategies, which emerged in the course of the research, as only one spouse per couple had been recruited to the focus groups.

This elaboration and 'testing' of marriage negotiations and strategies would require a different research setting, most notably a one-to-one interview (or couple-interviewer)

situation. A number of key themes have nevertheless emerged from this study and may offer anchor points for future investigations.

1 The life cycle of relationships.

Group participants repeatedly emphasised the changing nature of their relationship, its stresses and harmonies, and of the means of negotiation and communication that are employed to make relationships workable. Clearly, more detail than could be obtained here is necessary to understand fully the interactions between, and responses of, couples/partners to these changes, including, as suggested by more than one participant, the role of developing shared future goals. In particular, the use of 'give and take' strategies over time would benefit from more research.

2 The declining influence of societal norms and values.

Older participants emphasised the power of the influence of societal norms and values on the way they have conducted their relationships. Both older and younger participants remarked that inherited norms and values, different between the two groups, continued to shape their current thinking of, and behaviour within, their marriage. Issues of interest for future research may be:

- to study, in more depth, how 'modern' norms and values affect older relationships and how modern values can be, and are, used to stabilise (or, indeed, undermine) these relationships. 'Medium-age' relationships, for whom dealing with the break between traditional and modern values may be most problematic, should be included in this;
- to compare the role and understanding of changing social rules among couples whose marriage ends in separation or divorce.

3 Gender and gender relationships.

Men and women participants often gave very different accounts of their relationships or their perceptions of marriage as an institution. Women appeared to display a more inward-looking, marriage-focussed perspective, whereas men's perceptions appeared more strongly oriented towards events or behaviours external to a marriage. Women spoke openly of manipulating their husbands' behaviour and employing strategies to achieving their personal objectives; men did not, or much less so. Future research might investigate and compare the use of symbolic as well as verbal communication strategies between husbands and wives,

their awareness of the partner's use of such strategies and their own responses. It might ask whether these strategies really work as intended or whether their effectiveness is random or, indeed, imagined.

4 Mutuality.

Marriage in our study had survived despite intermittent disagreement, conflict or disputes; and participants had employed threats and manipulations to achieve or enforce settlements.

A key principle that participants claimed they had adopted was to use their threats and manipulations flexibly, in particular to be willing to withdraw threats. From a more positive angle, participants stressed the importance of both partners in a marriage wishing to maintain the relationships for such strategies to be successful. Future research might wish to explore the validity of this assertion and, in particular, the nature and stability of mutual commitment in situations of 'marital stress'.

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ANNEX A

MODERN MARRIAGE TOPIC GUIDE

1 GROUP INTRODUCTION

2 MARRIAGE INTRODUCTION

- What makes a 'good'/'bad' marriage?
- How important is marriage/is it to be married today?
- Is this different from, say, when you were a child?

3 BEGINNING A MARRIAGE

You have all been married for a number of years, some of you for more than xxx years.

- Why did you get married?
- What attracted you to each other?
- What were you hoping to get out of your marriage?

4 'INSIDE MARRIAGE' MANAGEMENT

When you are looking back over the years that you have been married, what have been the best times in your marriage?

- What is it that makes the 'good times' good?

There must have been times when things haven't gone so well in your marriage

- What makes the 'bad times' bad?
- How does one get/have you got through these times?

[**Prompt** – How happy are you with the way the day-to-day tasks in the household are managed?

- What do you think has made your marriage last?

For some people marriage does not last

- Why do you think that is?
- Have you ever thought about separating?
- What do you think made you stay together?

RECAP AND ASK - finally we would like to know: What are the 3 most important things that you **do** that have kept your marriage going?



Care for the Family, PO Box 488, Cardiff CF15 7YY
Tel: (029) 2081 0800 Fax: (029) 2081 4089
Email: mail@cff.org.uk Web: www.care-for-the-family.org.uk

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